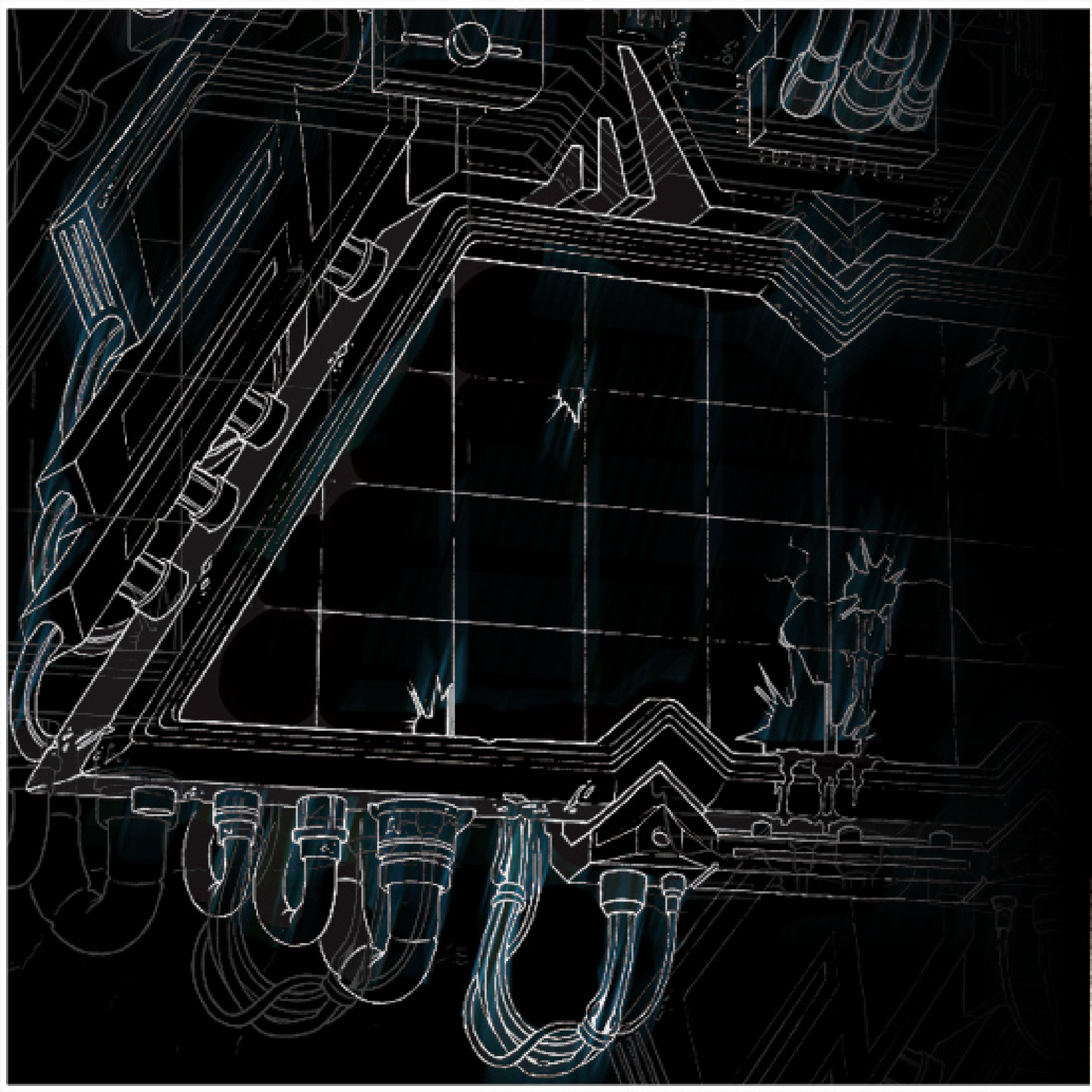


INTRODUCTION

Milo scraped a shoe against the bricks, grimacing slightly at the slide of mold between his foot and the ground. It grew in orderly rows, the mold, creeping up from the dirt-filled crevices between the bricks and running along at regular right-angles up and down the dingy streets. Long ago, a city would have a flower or a tree to identify itself with. Now the only thing that seemed to grow was mold. This seemed fitting, to Milo. Old Town, chief crop and only export: slime. "Have we moved at all?" he said.

"–and they were green, green, gold and red, leaves a-shake in sunliiiight …" Mr. Laszlo crooned in response. Milo ducked his head to hide his grin and shook his head a little. Old people loved singing "There Were Trees." He supposed it was different if you'd actually seen one outside of a book or a vidfeed. Or seen a book outside of a vidfeed, for that matter. Mr. Laszlo had been croaking the song under his breath for the better part of an hour.

"You're in a merry mood," Milo said, trying not to imply how funny he found it. They were packed in on all sides, a loosely shifting shoal of weary people in the shadow of the boat. Mr. Laszlo slung an arm

around his shoulder, nearly putting out his neighbor's eye in the process, and shook him feebly, cackling.

"We've made it out, Milo. We're there!"

"We're still here," Milo said. "We're not even on the ramp yet." Mr. Laszlo flicked his ear.

"True, but soon we'll be up there," he pointed at the upper deck, impossibly high and seemingly deserted. The ramp they were climbing (or would be, if the line ever moved) led to a middle deck, the very center of the boat's imposing flank. "We'll be eaten by this monster and shat out in the promise land."

Monster was a good word for it, Milo thought. The boat was even uglier up close.

You could see it from almost anywhere; it was taller than every building in the city. News of it had come weeks ago, a ship is coming, a giant ship, to take us away from this dead place. Words like hope, promise, and opportunity had the dust blown off them and when the boat had appeared on the horizon, still three days away from docking, it had gleamed like gold. As it approached, it had grown impossibly large, its shadow spilling over the shore, and

something about the way it shined had changed. The lights on the water at night became less like candles and more like insects'eyes. The glint of the metal sides less precious stones, more … carapace. Gun barrels. Teeth. It heaved in the water; it gnashed, foaming. But it came for them, and offered what no one else had: escape. Milo was glad it was ugly. That meant it wasn't a dream.

They inched forward and upward, the hollow clank of the ramp measuring their progress. Mr. Laszlo sang softly; Milo craned his neck to see the entry point. The doorway was a perfect square, with a black metal panel sliding open and shut. Two men in close-fitting black clothes stood in front of it, rigid posture, like soldiers. They had masks, also black, stretched across the lower halves of their faces. Were they doctors?

"Won't be long now," Mr. Laszlo said. Milo edged in front of him, vibrating with excitement, hardly able to contain himself as they neared the front of the line.

One of the men in black suits stepped toward them, walking a short way down the ramp. "We'll process twenty at a time," he said, and stopped at Milo, clapping him on the shoulder. "From here, through

the door, please." He nudged Milo ahead of him and began marching back up the ramp. Milo stumbled slightly, looking backward.

"But, I'm with– couldn't we go together?" he asked. The man urged him forward to the door.

"Twenty at a time," he said, and touched a lit square on the side of the doorframe. The door slid open and he pushed Milo over the threshold.

"But–"Milo looked over his shoulder, apprehensive. Mr. Laszlo nodded at him.

"See you inside," the old man said, and Milo could only blink before the black slab severed the space between them.

The clang of the door made Milo jump, knocking him off balance when the black-suited man beside him spun him roughly around and prodded him forward.

"Follow the line," one of them said. "I nitial check, then they'll see you to your berths." Milo swallowed and tripped forward, bumping awkwardly into the person in front of him. It was so dark in the hallway he could hardly see, but two rows of tiny lights outlined

their path. They glowed yellow, then orange, then blue, at regular intervals as they shuffled forward toward a lit room at the end of the corridor. Yellow … orange … blue. Milo's heart was pounding; the floor vibrated and all he could hear was the growl of the ship. Yellow … orange … . Mr. Laszlo's song swam back into his head. He couldn't attach any meaning to these colors. He watched a black suit with a handscreen ask the girl at the front of the line her name, heard her say "Luma," before the drone of the ship rose and drowned them out again. A light on the handscreen shone yellow. Milo watched her lips move. A second light; blue. A nother black suit came out of the lit doorway and pulled her inside, out of sight. Milo was shoved forward. Questions, answers, lights, forward. The ship growled louder and Milo's blood sang in his ears. Then it was just him in the light of the doorway. The black suit with the handscreen asked his name. Milo told him, shaking. The light on the handscreen lit yellow. Is that good or bad?

"How old are you?" The black suit was saying.

“Fifteen,” Milo said, his throat contracting. The light shone orange. “What does–“But then he was being pushed into the room. It was stark white, and empty. His eyes burned in the sudden brightness. Where were the others? The black suit with the handscreen followed him inside, pulled him to the center of the floor and held the screen up to his face.

“Make an observation about this room and speak it into the recorder,” the black suit said.

Yellow, orange, blue. “I–“Milo rasped. He felt something cold and metallic press up against the back of his neck. He jerked reflexively but someone was holding him still.

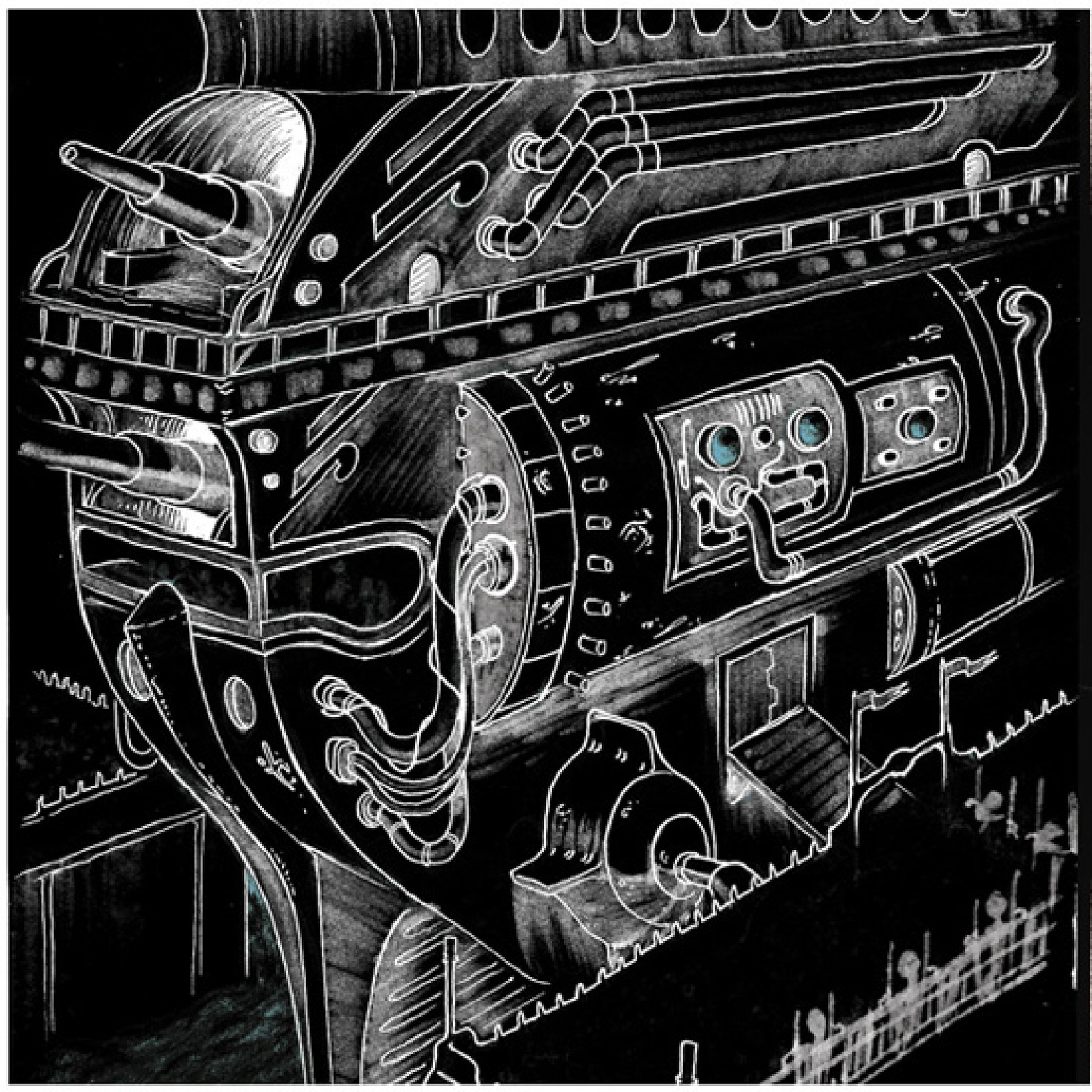
“Speak clearly.”

Milo couldn’t think. “I don’t want to die here,” he said. The back of his neck burned, and the edges of his vision dimmed and blurred.

“… most people say ‘it’s very white,’” he heard someone murmur. Then he was being lifted, carried, laid out on a horizontal surface. He heard straps, buckles; he couldn’t feel anything.

“Where would you like to die?” he heard, or thought he heard, before light came up around him and he closed his eyes against it. The rest just seemed like so much grey and waiting.

I DON’T WANT TO DIE HERE



IMMIGRANTS

Milo woke up to his own voice sounding in his ear. It was dark. He gasped, lungs burning as though he'd been under water for the last– how much time had passed? Hours? Months? He couldn't see. Someone was pulling him upright and then forward, his sluggish legs struggling to remember their function. He stumbled into dim light and was swallowed into a mass of bodies, black suits dotted amongst them, everyone moving forward and slightly downward. Milo's head swam; his feet moved automatically until the light hit his eyes and they were spilling out onto a vast wooden pier, crusted with salt and bird leavings. Milo stopped dead. The flow of people continued around him, jostling his shoulders as they passed, but he raised his eyes to the towering skyline in front of him and just stared.

The city bristled. Whereas the boat had dwarfed Old Town, here there were towers upon towers– sharp, deadly shards stabbing upward into the sky and disappearing at ground level under mounds of jagged structure. Pipes and wires jutted crazily in all directions, worming up from the street, dribbling down the sides of buildings, spewing steam and coughing out harsh, pneumatic noises. A brown haze

hung in the air, collecting in dark clouds that obscured the tops of the tallest spires.

"Keep moving into the hall, please." Someone shoved him roughly from behind and Milo was swept into the stream again, moving off the pier and through a blackened stone archway into a vaulted tunnel. They were led through into an enormous open room, circular, with a high domed ceiling and corridors jutting off in several directions, like a train station. More and more people filed in, the crowd swirling and nervous as black suits wandered this way and that in groups of two and three.

"Milo!" A hand grasped the back of Milo's jacket and he turned to see Mr. Laszlo, looking haggard. Milo threw himself at the old man, who chuckled weakly and patted the back of his head.

"I didn't know if ..." Milo started, then swallowed. "What are we doing here? Where is this?" Mr. Laszlo pushed him gently back and gripped his shoulders.

"I don't know," he said, eyes wide and round. His mouth hinted at a small, tremulous smile. "But we

made it, Milo. We're never going back. We're free." Mr. Laszlo smiled wider, and then a clear plastic bag was being lowered over his head, a black suit pulling the drawstring tight around his neck.

Milo was shocked frozen for an instant, and as he moved to help there was a crack sound and a bolt of fizzy pain shot up his spine, halting his limbs. Mr. Laszlo was scrabbling at the bag with his fingers, two black suits holding him while a third loaded a capsule into a syringe-gun. Milo couldn't move; a scream gargled in the back of his throat, barely audible. Mr. Laszlo's rapid breath fogged against the plastic, obscuring his terrified face. The black suit with the syringe-gun shoved the old man's sleeve up and fired into his forearm. His legs went out and the two other black suits lowered him down and dropped him, stepping over his body to collapse on Milo. One held his arms and the other ran a handscreen over him, scanning for something. Milo's eyes darted crazily. All around him this was happening; bags lowered over heads, people shocked motionless and surrounded by black suits. It didn't make any sense. Milo couldn't breathe.

The black suit put the handscreen away and pulled out a thick metal cylinder with symbols embossed on either end, one red, one green.

“Pull his head back,” he said, and went to press the red end to Milo’s neck.

“What are you doing? He’s Line,” said the other black suit.

“Uh-uh, Dexterous. I massed him, he indexes.”

“He’s too tall.”

“Seriously? Fine, whatever. Line, then.” The black suit flipped the cylinder around and pressed the other end into Milo’s neck. There was a chunk and a sting like needle-pricks, and the black suit was loading a capsule into another syringe-gun. “Hold him up ‘til his legs come back,” he said, and fired into the back of Milo’s hand. Tremors ran through his body as the paralysis dissipated and the black suits half-led and half- carried him toward a far corridor. Milo twisted weakly in their grasp.

“You kill– you kihhh–“he choked out. Everywhere, black suits pushed and dragged trembling people to

the exits, stepping over dozens of bag-headed bodies.

"They're not dead," said one of the black suits. "Look at'em kick." It was true; strewn about like grotesque, faceless dolls, the prone bodies were also trembling–jerking in perfect unison to some unknown rhythm. "They're full of energy."

"Good thing, too," said the other black suit. "Gotta keep the lights on …"

"In these dark times," the suits intoned in unison. Milo coughed out a sob as they hustled him down the corridor. By the time they reached the end, his legs could hold him and he shuffled, shaking and gasping, out into a public square. The crowd was much the same: bewildered, quivering people, necks stamped red and green, shepherded by the black suits into a loose huddle in the center of the square. A flash of bright hair caught Milo's eye and he saw a familiar profile: the girl from the boat. Luma, he remembered numbly, yellow, blue. She was gazing, frightened, up at something above them. A black-gloved hand caught Milo under the chin and pointed his head up.

“Let’s see if the King has anything new to say today,” said a voice behind him. A nearby black suit snorted in response and a hush fell as a screen on the side of one of the buildings in front of them lit up and resolved itself into a picture.

It was a man’s face, glowing and angular. His expression was distant, but somehow kind, and he had an air of elegance … .of control. Power, Milo’s mind whispered. The collar of the man’s coat was ornate– beautiful, but archaic, as though he were a lord in a fairy tail. A king. His eyes flashed darkly on the screen. He smiled, and began to speak.

“My new citizens,” he intoned, voice rolling over the crowd like a fog. “Do not be afraid.”

No one moved. There was utter silence, all eyes on the picture, as the speech continued.

“Heroic children, you have crossed the water to take your place in the service of this city, your home.” The man’s gaze beseeched them, eyes staring directly outward. “You are luminous,” he whispered. “You will save us. This city lives and breathes because you work. You are the blood in its veins; you are its

heartbeat." A pulse seemed to emanate from the screen; Milo felt himself relaxing. The man's face became focused, his tone more strident. "In these dark times," he said, "give us your power. In these dark times, trust me to use it." Milo let out his breath. He was floating. He was safe. "In these dark times, you have found your way to the city of light."

A soft murmur traveled through the crowd, and Milo felt buoyant and fizzy as the King looked down upon them, lips in a slight smile.

" WELCOME TO METROPOLIS"

DEEP SEARCH

We are truly immigrants to the darkness of the unknown, brothers.

True enough, Deep Brother. We're not in Kansas anymore.

If only the professor could see us now, brothers.
Do not be distracted by your musings, brothers.
Musings are what make us whole, Deft Brother.
Remember that we are the Brothers of Wisdom, brothers.
Do you feel that our training has prepared us well, Dear Brother?
Of course, Deep Brother. Remember:
We are scholastic, brothers.
We are stoic, brothers.
And we are shining, brothers.

But we are only three, brothers. Foes will be many.
True enough, Deft Brother. But the power of the M will aid us.
Can you feel it, brothers?
Yes, Dear Brother. It is close.

What is our depth, brothers?
Thirty fathoms, Deep Brother.
No joke there, Dear Brother.
Bring the ship to surface and pressurize the cabin, Deft Brother.
Ready your crystals, brothers. Open the hatch, Deft Brother.
Only if you
've got my back, Deep Brother.

So dark, brothers!
Are you sure our coordinates are correct, Dear Brother?
You know as well as I, Deep Brother.
Did you expect the heart of Metropolis to be welcoming?
Quiet, brothers! What was that sound?
Look out, brothers!
Good shooting, Deft Brother.

Do you sense it, brothers? It is near!
Yes, Dear Brother.
Our crystals are hungry, and see how the cavern ahead is luminous.
Look at the bats, brothers! Look how they cower at

the light!
Be stoic, Deep Brother. Our goal approaches.
Our shining moment, brothers.
The height of our scholastic ventures, brothers.
The M shall be restored,
brothers!

Be careful, brothers! Something is amiss!
Do you feel the ground, Deft Brother?
Yes, Dear Brother. It strains under our footfall.
Could it be a trap, Deft Brother?
This whole cavern feels like a trap, Dear
Brother.

Watch your step, brothers!
An abyss, Deft Brother!
Darkness, Deep Brother!

FAILURE, DEAR BROTHER!

A KING ALONE

If there were a cure for all the ills of humanity…war, disease, poverty…who in their right mind would neglect that cure? Who would not take up the power before them and save the human race from the problems that has plagued it since man first made a fist at another man, first spat on another man, first trod on another man in order to take home the bigger game? These evils have always been within us, yet also within us is the wisdom to save humanity from those ills. Yet what is the cost of such wisdom? Reputation? Liberty? Family? Why does it seem that while I endlessly pursue the wisdom that can cure us, providence must penalize me, fellow humans must chastise me?

I can be seen as constructing a mountain of wisdom. I have piled heap upon heap of stone and dirt to create a peak, yet for every inch of wisdom gained there is an inevitable cascade of runoff that buries a different part of myself. Here, on this slope, I gained a theory of human willpower as related to magnetism, yet the respect and appreciation of my fellow students was buried. It is here on this hillock that I studied the ancient texts in a tireless effort, yet found my relationships with my father and my fianc ée crushed

under a landslide. And here, this ridge here, this is where I abandoned all of them, or rather they abandoned me; family, colleagues, friends and foes alike, for the discovery of the machine. And it is the peak of this mountain of wisdom, the summit representing all my studies, where the machine shall rest. While the rest of my being has been stripped away, buried beneath my efforts to attain a greater understanding of humanity's ills, the machine shall shine forth from the summit, and all will see the necessity of my ventures.

I have named it the M Machine, both for its shape and the meditative hum that it transmits. One can only assume that all who submit themselves to its presence will be as awed and pacified as I was upon discovering it, and it is this power that I must utilize to carry out my plan for the restoration of humanity. War, disease, and the filth of poverty plague our species, assaulting our bodies, our minds, and our right to call ourselves human. Yet the machine...the machine calms the mind, wrings the filth from our core, and restores a sense of being truly alive. It is so powerful that upon my initial discovery I had to exercise my mind and my senses quite rigorously in

order to think clearly and logically in its presence. Its power, although rewarding, is that of a lion's, and I found it necessary to take up whip and fashion myself a lion tamer in order to harness and control its power.

And how powerful I have become in my role as lion tamer! Students, colleagues, even friends, all those who ever used their doubt and skepticism, or yes, even jealousy, to trample me and cut me down...when the lion tamer cracks his whip and the M Machine is revealed, they will all be forced to see at its truest light the power they could only ignore or scoff at before. Finally, my efforts will be paid off, my mountain of wisdom annexed and recognized to be a grand feat for the sake of humanity.

It will be no small feat, to be sure, and requires a project, an experiment so vast, requiring so many subjects, so much manpower, so many people and industries at work, that there is only one appropriate name that it shall bear, encompassing all its glory and the nobility of its goal:

METROPOLIS!

FACES

I am slowly going crazy, 1-2-3-4-5-6– "Switch."

Luma handed off her spent burn-tool and the Collector slapped another one into her palm. She thumbed it on and grabbed another metal bolt off the line, burning the little bumps and flaws off its surface so it would fit smoothly into whatever industrial hole it was meant to fill. Whatever. She put it back on the line. Nobody's checking them. She picked up another bolt. I should burn my initials on, but it would take longer than two seconds. She put it back on the line. Two seconds to burn, thirty burns per tool, six seconds rest, one Collector every minute, the math doesn't add up, did you catch that? Ha ha ha!

The woman across from her fumbled a bolt and cursed under her breath, grabbing wildly for it as the line pulled it away. Luma stared at her; she had a sheen of sweat on her upper lip. She was picking the bolts up when they were already past her target zone. There was a deep crease between her eyebrows. Get it together, lady. They're not gonna get any closer that way. Pick up two next time. Only burn the good ones for a second and a half. Rest four seconds instead of six. Hold your wrong hand out for a new tool so when

you switch hands it'll be the right way up. Get the picture, dum-dum? Feel the rhythm? Maybe I should teach her the song. Crazy going slowly am I, 6-5-4-3-2-1–

"Switch." New tool. Thirty more bolts, new tool. Thirty-seven more tools, and then a break. Five minutes of enforced darkness, totally black. They stopped the line during breaks but not the other machines, and there was no clear path to the door. Run free, brave slaves! Then trip and die.

Before, she'd been herself. Talked to people, made them smile, spent the breaks telling stories in the dark, hey guys remember Old Town? Bet you never thought you'd miss it, hyuk hyuk. Tried to make them hold on to the hope of escape. But they'd stopped listening and it hurt, it hurt. They gave up. Now she just sat in the black. She listened to it hum, and let herself go a little … bit … insane.

She wasn't sure when she'd started dreaming. I'm not dreaming, I'm eavesdropping … with my eyes. My inner eye. I'm a spy from the past, watching the future. I've got vidfeed receptors implanted in my teeth. When she was quiet, the vision came on like a

faucet. First the King, then the … Machine. Both together, they were the same, they were both the Machine, they were sick, they were dying, they were everything, they were eternal. They laughed and they laughed and they laughed, and the city crumbled into a black cloud of ash. This telepathic soap-opera is really fantastic, sure wish there was more than one episode. In the dream, the King would talk to her. Do you think you can do it? Can you make it happen? You're pathetic, Luma, you won't lead them anywhere. Make WHAT happen, you bald abomination, lead WHO? Then white light would rush into her head and she would know for certain that all she had to do was– what?

One minute to lights. Four-second eye adjust, then line, then bolts, bolts, bolts, bolts …

Luma watched the city crumble. Held the King's mocking gaze. She pushed harder, looked deeper, and she was inside the Machine.

30 seconds.

The lights were about to come on. Luma thought of the woman across from her. Are you going to help

me, dum-dum? Fat chance. I have to– 6-5-4-3-2-1–

Switch. The lights came up. Luma stood up and spun to her left, crossing two paces to the next chair. "Switch places with me," she said. "Now." The boy was thin and gangly, maybe fifteen. He made the move by reflex, too startled to speak. He looked back as he sat, and opened his mouth, but the bolts started flowing and he scrambled to keep up. Luma held her breath and reached across the line, snatching the burn- tool out of the hand of the worker across from her.

The worker– another woman, youngish, maybe Luma's age– jerked her head up and gaped. Her hands fluttered, eyes wide and panicked. "What– gi– I can't–"

"Stop," Luma said, fixing her gaze. "Listen to me. Stop. Look, nobody's down there. We've made millions of these, they're for nothing, no one is using them. It's just work. Stop." She raised her hands up, palms forward in surrender, holding the woman's eyes with her own. Bolts slid by them, untouched, imperfect. Slowly, incredibly, the woman mirrored Luma's gesture. Her mouth flickered and a shocked

chuckle escaped. Luma grinned at her and she returned it, hands trembling in the air. They shared one laugh together, bubbling and defiant, and then the line came to a grinding, shuddering halt.

There was a whirring sound. Holes like mouths opened up in the ceiling, and small black boxes lowered themselves down on telescoping poles. One behind each worker, with a single tiny tight, blinking yellow. Luma squinted her eyes. Are those cameras?

The woman across from Luma twisted to look at the box behind her, and the line began moving at the exact moment a snaking tounge of electricity shot out of the box and hit the woman in the shoulder with a crack. She bellowed, rocked forward by the impact. She grabbed her stolen burn-tool from across the line and started picking bolts feverishly, whimpering with pain. “I’m working! I’M WORKING!” She screamed. Her arm was a mass of ruined flesh. Luma’s mouth worked silently. She heard panic down the line, a chair scraping, then suddenly in the opposite corner there was another crack and a body hit the floor. “BURN!” The woman across from her shrieked. “Make it stop!” Luma picked up her tool and thumbed

it on, fear singing shrilly in her ears.

Seven bolts and then another crack, two more cracks, now the collectors were running their paces but they were scared, too, tools were dropped. Crack. A Collector was down and another one raced to gather up his fallen cargo.

It's completely random, Luma thought numbly. There's no pattern at all, there's no sense. Her breath came in shallow puffs and her hands shook. She burned.

Crack.

Forty-nine tools, people were sobbing and there were bodies all over the floor. Luma burned. It's almost time for the line to stop– will it stop? What if it doesn't stop? Her hands moved, eyes blinded with tears. I didn't want this, I didn't mean to, I'm sorry, please stop-- 6-5-4-3-2--

Crack. The boy who had taken her chair. She saw lightning hit the back of his neck, go through it, come out the other side. He crumpled to the floor. The white light rushed up inside of Luma and blotted out all sound. She knew everything. She could see

everything. The lights were shut off.

LUMA BOLTED

BLACK

Welcome back, viewers, for yet another exciting episode of The Brothers of Wisdom, available only on your state-sponsored holovision network XG294.

If you haven't paid for your monthly subscription, remember that partaking in holovision entertainment or other recreational activities without individual sacrifice is considered a capital offense, so be sure to insert your payment card right now or sign up for automatic wage sacrifice options with your workplace.

And now, back to our program!

If you missed last week's Brothers of Wisdom, we witnessed their infiltration into the underground heart of Metropolis via deep sea submarine! The brothers had navigated the many perils of the underground caverns and were closing in on the secret location of the M Machine when all of a sudden, the floor of a chamber collapsed, plunging them into a dark abyss from which escape seems impossible!

Let's join them now!

Here we see the brothers as they brush the dust and rubble from their suits. It's pitch dark at the bottom of the abyss, and the brothers can only call out to each

other to know that they're all alive and well. They try without success to activate their power crystals as a source of light. It seems they're out of luck at the moment, but at least they're all alive and intact. But wait, what's this? Suddenly they hear a frantic scraping of rock above them, and it's getting closer...as if someone or something is scurrying down the side of the abyss towards them. Can it be friend or foe?

The brothers try more eagerly now to activate their power crystals, still to no avail, and still the sound of something scraping and scratching at the rock walls grows louder and closer. A barrage of dislodged pebble rains down upon them. Frantically now they work at their crystals, the sounds growing increasingly louder and more maddening until...finally! The crystals ignite and emit a blaze of light, its warm glow immediately satisfying and reassuring the brothers, only to reveal the terror that is the source of the commotion.

Suspended above the brothers and ready to pounce is a black mechanical spider that is bigger than the submersible that the brothers had infiltrated the

caverns in! Upon its eight legs are titanium alloy barbs, its mandibles are a nest of gears and blades, and its eyes are a network of glowing lens and optic cables that make any notion of hiding or escape next to impossible. No, the brothers must fight this beast, and with the crystals at their side, surely they are up to the task.

But they soon find that success takes more than willpower, as the beast quickly shoots a length of webbing from its rear, pinning one of the brothers against the cavern wall before they can make the first move. The web is strong and thick, more like steel cable than a normal spiders'silk, and to the poor brother under its grip it feels like barbed wire. One of the two remaining brothers rushes at the beast, his power crystal held aloft, while the other makes for his trapped brother, intending to free him from the evil mesh. The web is strong, but not stronger than an ancient crystal derived from the power of the M. He works at cutting away the webbing, but for every strand he dislodges, the webbing flexes its own power, digging through the suit of the trapped brother and slashing at his skin. Meanwhile, the brave brother who rushed the spider has taken a fantastic

leap and is now perched upon its head. As the beast thrashes about, the brother attempts to blind the creature by hacking at the many optic membranes and cables with his power crystal. He seems to be gaining an upper hand when all of a sudden his arm slips too close to the beast's mandibles and it bites down with all its might.

Gears and blades thrash and chomp, and the brother hears the terrifying sound of ripping sinew before he feels the pain of his arm being ripped from his shoulder. The power crystal, his only weapon, clatters to the floor of the abyss.

Meanwhile, we join the Shadow King in his lair as he sprawls restlessly on his mountainous throne: a jumble of wires, tubes, pistons, chambers, and motors, all arranged with one purpose – to divert and absorb the power of the M Machine. The Shadow King, skeletal and wizened, his robes barely hanging to his form, is tossing and turning on top of his throne. He is like someone wracked with insomnia or a dog that turns in circles before it is comfortable enough to lie down.

He can sense the struggle at hand in the caverns underneath Metropolis, where the Brothers of Wisdom are tirelessly endeavoring to use their powers to restore the M Machine – subverting those powers from the King! A fter all he has worked for, after he has devoted his life to harnessing the machine and using it to build this great city, this shining beacon of humanity! He sees the Brothers of Wisdom as thieves in the core of his being, yet in his frail state he can do nothing but watch!

Several of his surveillance monitors are fed directly by the beastly spider's many optical instruments, and what he sees angers him immensely and makes him toss and turn with a fresh irritation. He sees the Brothers of Wisdom fighting as if without fear; one of them had been trapped in the spider's web, but is now freed; another lost an arm to the spider's jaws, but has managed to roll away from the beast and is brandishing his weapon with his remaining hand. The three of them join forces in the center of the cavern and brandish their separate power crystals as one. A bright glow emanates from their combined crystals, growing stronger in proximity to the M Machine, usurping the Shadow King's own powers. The

Shadow King gnaws at his hands and tears at his throne as he watches. The brothers continue to advance, growing brighter and stronger as they near the spider, which seems to be backing away in fear – impossible! All of the King's monitors go blank. He gasps in disbelief. He feels like his heart has stopped. Has he finally lost control of the power of the great M Machine?

Is this the end of the Shadow King's reign? Have the Brothers of Wisdom truly defeated the spider and reached their goal? What will become of the M Machine? What will become of Metropolis and all of its citizens? Tune in next week to find out! And don't forget your sacrificial payment to your holovision network XG294 and its affiliated subsidiaries!

BLACK

SHADOW IN THE ROSE GARDEN

Ohhh you should be dead, girl, you are crazy and you should be dead.

Nothing made sense. None of this made any sense. Not her life, not the dream, not the madness on the factory floor– I'm sorry I'm sorry I couldn't I didn't know– not the way she was able to navigate in the dark, through the maze of moving apparatus, out past the workers'quarters where she'd never been allowed, through door after door that should have been locked. What made the least sense of all, as her feet pounded thunderously in the corridors, was that nobody seemed to be following.

If nobody's chasing you, why are you running?

Luma rounded a corner and skidded, banging into the wall as she redirected herself, momentum resistant to her sudden change of course. Out out out. Gotta get out.

If the lights are off, how do you know where you're going?

"I don't!" Luma shouted aloud. "Stop asking me questions!" Her hand found a metal rail protruding from the wall– her only warning that the floor was

about to become stairs. She dropped to all fours and for a moment there was rhythm and regularity; breath in sync with hands and feet, climbing and climbing and climbing upward out of the dark. Over twisted bits of mechanical leg and pincer, cavern echoes playing back a battle perilously won. Narrow rock tunnel– one behind another, Brothers! Are you here, Dear? Turn left, Deft. Oh it's getting steep, Deep. We hold the light in the dark. Dark pieces of light, while dark in the dark, will add light to light when wielded right. Put wisdom to might and then comes light–

The sudden arrival of a landing sent Luma sprawling, but she gathered herself, gulping, and groped for the next step. Up and up, makes no sense, why go up to get out? No wonder no one's trying to catch you, you're catching yourself– her head knocked against something solid and she realized the stairs had run neatly up to the ceiling. What? She slapped her hands against the surfaces in a panic. A dead end? I'm trapped, it's a trap it's a trap it's a trap– a groove, a handle– door. The panel scraped and squeaked as Luma slid it open, a thin slice of light spilling out onto the stairs and growing wider. Light! That must mean–

The little room was circular and ringed with windows. Devoid of furnishings, ceiling too low for standing; just a peculiarly decorative flourish on an utterly utilitarian structure. An observation alcove– a long-ago architect's one indulgent whim. Luma hoisted herself through the trapdoor and crawled to the edge, looking out. She was hardly more than fifteen feet up. The factory floor was underground– she hadn't realized. Go up to get out. You're up now, so get out! She pressed her face and palms against the glass. How do I … she backed off and sat down, propping one foot against the window, tapping it, testing. Better do this right the first time, tap-tap–

BOOM BOOM

The rumble inside her skull knocked her flat. She lay gasping, vision fuzzed and flickering, as darkness, rage, and certainty surged up within her.

THEY WILL FAIL

There was the royal face, swollen and contorted with fury, eyes bleeding black and mouth in a scream. Torn apart but somehow growing, expanding–

THEY WILL DIE

There were the Brothers, crystals held steady. Their shine first answered then swallowed up by a bright, violent white. It flared, pushed against the darkness and burst, solidifying. A perfect ‘M’pulsing in the blackness. The Machine was alive.

They’re healing it– but they don’t– light and shadow, you can’t separate–

She could feel the power flowing into the King, hear his laughter booming louder. She choked on overwhelming sadness. The man and the machine. One’s power is the other’s power. The M restored will save us; the M restored will bring the King to heights of power unknown …

Luma grimaced, frustrated by the contradiction. The King, the Machine, the people, the city … crumbling to ash, the dark clouds rising, NOW– the white light erupted. She was the M, she saw everything. But so did the King. And when she spoke, her voice was also his.

I WILL TRIUMPH

She kicked out, suddenly, shattering the window. She scrambled up to see as the pieces fell, catching what

light was left in the sky. Crystals, she thought numbly, and felt the light rise up in her mind again.

Land softy when you fly, Luma. Navigate the dark. Return and they will listen, they will listen.

LUMA JUMPED

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